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How to use the media effectively?

Introduction

Planning is about how we plan for, and make decisions about, the future of our cities, towns and countryside. Planning has a long history, even thousands of years ago people will have discussed where to build homes and shelters!

Over the centuries, a more formal way of making these decisions was set up. So when we want to build a new house or someone wants to develop a new shopping centre, your local planning authority is responsible for deciding whether it should go ahead. 'Local planning authority' usually means the district or borough council, not the parish or town council.

Without a planning system, everyone could construct buildings anywhere, or use land in any way they wanted, no matter what effect this would have on other people who live or work in their area.

Members of the planning committee, members of the public and your locally elected representatives are being bombarded with information everyday. They get news on television and the radio, they get reports at work, they get advertisements all the time, and they hear that juicy piece of gossip about the neighbour down the street. Your campaign message has to break through that thick wall of other information.

You can guarantee that developers are feeding information to your target audience all the time, whether this is the positive aspects of their plans, details on their consultation exercises, figures from polls or questionnaire answers or detailed reports on their exhibitions and increasingly importantly on how the plans have evolved as a result of community input.

Using the media to broadcast your message is a great way of achieving your goal of informing people on your campaign and the reasons why you think the planning application should be rejected. If you use the media to get your campaign message out, you will need good relations with the reporters, a compelling reason for them to tell your story, as well as an easily understood point to your message. This guide will show you how you can achieve this.

Why have a media spokesman?

If you decide that you want to use the press to communicate and persuade voters, then it is important to have a plan as to how you will accomplish this. A great first step is to **appoint a spokesperson**. This

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makes the task of coordinating your media campaign easier and also provides a point of contact for media outlets.

Decide who in your group or organisation will deal with the media. Choose someone who can put across clearly what you are doing, who feels at ease and confident in the broadcasting situation, and who has easy access to a telephone and an answer phone. Having a single point of contact insures that your media strategy stays coordinated, structured and on message.

One of the media spokesman's first tasks is to develop a comprehensive list of all the media outlets in the area, complete with reporters' names, phone and fax numbers and deadlines.

How can I develop a media campaign?

You want everyone to know about your event or cause so you want to use the broadcast media. But unless you target your broadcaster and write your press release in a way, which catches his eye, you'll be wasting your time.

Like any professionals, broadcasters have their own language and codes, which you need to be aware of and respect. Having a media strategy, outlining what you want to say and when will be key to gaining support for your position and the respect of your opposition. As a rough rule of thumb, schedule a topic a week for your media campaign. This will keep it interesting, informative and keep the developers on the back foot.

It is essential that your campaign establish good relationships with print and broadcast journalists in your region for two reasons.

- First, the mass media is (generally speaking) free of cost for the campaign. Every time a journalist prints or broadcasts a story about your campaign, you have the opportunity to get your message out to your target audience at no direct money cost to your campaign.
- Second, the mass media is often considered credible. Members of the public are much more likely to believe positive information about your campaign if it comes from an "independent" source (the mass media) than if it comes from a "biased" source (your campaign).

Developers have the carrot of future advertising revenue to ensure 'fair' coverage by local media. Stop by your local newspaper's office and chat with reporters or editorial page editors. Give them special information like editorial backgrounders, special invitations to your

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events, and provide them with good useable quotes. By feeding them information, you are subconsciously shaping the argument.

What should my media campaign look like?

Letters to editors

A letter-to-the-editor gives you a chance to inform thousands of people about a proposed development in your area. Local newspapers reach a surprisingly large number of residents and therefore potential fellow objectors. The developers will be using this as a means of reaching them and you should too. Many people read these sections of the newspaper, especially elected officials.

Even if it is not published, your letter might inspire an editorial on the same subject. As a rule of thumb, write a maximum of 200 words on your chosen topic. Remember, the aim is to create a debate and by putting forward 1 argument instead of 3 you can be more detailed and effective in your criticism of the scheme. The planning application process runs over many weeks, therefore many issues of the newspaper. Planning a strategy to voice all your concerns over a course of weeks will keep your issue in the news and more importantly relevant and fresh! By the time developers defend their position, you will already be striking the next blow.

Don't forget to sign your name and give your address and telephone number although the latter will not be published. Most newspapers do not print anonymous letters, although they may withhold your name if you feel strongly about it. Newspapers often receive more letters than they can print, so if your letter is not published the first time, try again. Use your support network to write in as market forces drive a newspaper. If the editor has a postbag full of stories on one issue, he is more likely to give column inches to that story to cater to his readers.

An Opinion Piece

Many newspapers feature a section opposite the editorial pages (often called the Op-Ed page) for citizen opinion. If you are comfortable writing, consider submitting an article. This is a more in depth analysis of the issue clearly stating your case in a clear manner. Consider using this in week 10 of the planning application and basing this on your Detailed Objection Dossier.

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Writing Press Releases

Don't send out seven pages of information in the belief that someone will find it so fascinating that they'll read it all - they won't! Broadcasters are trained to be ruthless in editing, learning to cut out that favourite bit on the tape because it doesn't add to the story. They'll be more likely to consider your item if it's been written concisely.

- Keep a press release to a single side of A4, if possible, certainly no more than two
- Double spacing using a clear type face will make it accessible to the reader
- Print on one side of the paper only

Include the following information:

- Contact details of your media spokesman including name, address and telephone number.
- Make sure the words **PRESS RELEASE** are at the top of the page. Bold and colour.
- Write a clear heading and current date
- Your first paragraph should summarise the rest of the document. Make it punchy
- Use following paragraphs to expand your position.
- If applicable, include dates when the event or exhibition is open and dates of any press previews
- Insert a useable quote with a name and title.

If your organisation is not well known, or if you are including any statistics, include a separate section at the bottom: ***Information for editors*** giving:

- A short background details about your organisation
- Information on how a survey was carried out and by whom
- Full details of any published sources quoted, etc.

Don't neglect other forms of media!

Newspapers are a very useful tool but so are radio, television and the Internet. On larger issues such as house building, power generation, waste management and transport, get in touch with news and

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information programmes. This is a great chance of getting your issue raised nationally and locally. If news outlets or public interest programmes are debating environmental issues, they may want to hear about your campaign. Get in touch with them. Use phone in programmes as a marketing tool. It will broaden your target audience and open up further channels.

The most important thing to remember when giving an interview is to be well prepared and confident you can handle the topic of the interview – otherwise get someone else to do it. There is no shame in admitting that someone else may be better suited for the role. The campaign is bigger than any individual. Be sure of your facts and try when possible to bring facts to life by giving real examples and personal stories. For example, saying that the area is a flood risk is good; giving the example of a neighbour having been flooded is better.

Keep your responses very short as very little of what you say will be used. It is always useful to have sound bites ready on all the key issues, so you get straight to the point. Be polite, helpful and friendly, and always come across as warm and never lie or exaggerate. Stick to the facts, as the only weapon you have is your credibility!

On television

This is the most powerful media form. Not only do you have a large captive audience, but you also have an opportunity for people to get to know you. If you get a television channel interested in your campaign, make full use of it by:

- Looking the part but make sure you feel comfortable. Don't wear something that will make you feel ill at ease. Also sit comfortably and try not to fidget.
- Make eye contact with the interviewer.
- Interrupt gracefully or firmly if you disagree with another guest or the interviewer. For example, say: "If you will allow me to come in here ..."
- Have a last line ready as a concluding statement. If you have nothing more to say, repeat your main point.

On radio

- Avoid microphone popping – don't get too close to the microphone or speak directly into it. Instead speak over it.

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- Prepare properly and make sure you have three key points that you want to communicate clearly. Whatever else is going on, try to keep focussed on these points and get them across.

On phone-ins or chat shows

- Listen to what the interviewer and callers who phone in are saying, and respond to them as personally as possible.
- If it is a caller, try to remember the person's name and use their name when you respond to their question.
- Never humiliate or undermine a caller. Even if they are hostile, be as polite and friendly as possible. Focus on the issue rather than the person.
- Don't interrupt or lose your temper with people who oppose your views; rather remain cool and calm and leave the hysterics to others.
- Never be defensive and refuse to answer questions in an aggressive way. Stay as positive and open as possible. Regardless of how other people on the show are acting, be transparent and accountable, and show that you have confidence in what your organisation and campaign stand for.

What about the Internet?

I would also recommend harnessing the power of the Internet. Look for forums, discussion boards and potential partner organisations on which you can post information about your campaign. Use a similar approach as Press Releases with a short sharp summary as an introduction before going into further detail later on.

What should I take from this briefing?

Get the media involved in you campaign by involving them from the get go. Plan events that will highlight your cause but also generate public debate. Invite your local media outlets as they are always looking for local news stories. Be proactive and use the letters pages and have press releases drafted ahead of time. This is not only a good source of information for people but your councillors will be reading it too to gauge public opinion

PlanAct can help you with all your media solution needs from writing press releases to individual media spokesman-training courses. As a special reader offer why not email a press release for review by our

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staff free of charge, simply use the subject header 'free press release'
when emailing tips@planact.ac.uk

For further information on how PlanAct can help you plan and execute an effective campaign against unwanted development in your community why not email help@planact.co.uk